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MICHAEL MONAHAN

An Appreciation

by

Richard Le Gallienne

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THIS APPRECIATION IS MADE UP OF TWO SEPARATE REVIEWS WHICH APPEARED ORIGINALLY IN THE NEW YORK *Times* LITERARY SUPPLEMENT.

BOOKS, yes, let us have talk about books, but well flavored with the tabasco sauce of human interest * * * . Say what we will, we love or hate the man behind the book: there is no such thing as impersonality in true literature." So Mr. Michael Monahan provides me with a motto with which to start out these "Adventures in Life and Letters," to borrow a phrase which he in turn has adapted from that prince of *causeurs,* Anatole France. "Criticism," ran the now proverbial dictum, "is the adventures of the critic's soul among masterpieces." The proverb is somewhat musty nowadays, but twenty-odd years ago, as one's eye first fell upon it in *Le Temps,* or in the reprinted volumes of *La Vie Litteraire,* it had the freshness

of a new critical gospel, and has since inspired many a good critic with the courage to express his own opinions, in natural human fashion, rather than with the *ex cathedra* solemnity of an academic authority. Wilde's famous essay on criticism came out of it, and many other "Adventures in Criticism," besides Sir Quiller Couch's have started out with it for banner. Criticism as a form of autobiography! Why not? "I propose to speak of myself *a propos* Moliere, Shakespeare, Racine." That is really what every critic does, though he may veil himself in Sinaitic thunder clouds, and dart down shafts of anonymous lightning.

I am glad to find that a love for Charles Lamb—"Carolus Agnus," as he quaintly calls him—is one of the many tastes I share in common with "the man behind the book," whose warm humanity, as revealed to us now through some dozen confidential years of THE PAPY-

RUS, has already won for himself a place of similar endearment in our hearts as his whom he confesses to loving no less "for his late suppers, his too many pipes, his clinging to ale and gin," than for the essays and the letters. "Saint Charles," as we have all called him since Thackeray—probably because he was such a gentle-hearted sinner. Perhaps some days we shall be saying "Saint Michael," for a similar reason. At all events, St. Michael Monahan has to-day a distinction all of his own, a chimney-corner all to himself, by virtue of his possessing that personal charm of lettered *bonhomie,* which seems almost lost to literature, as at present practised. In an age of would-be literary dandies and superior persons, one is fathomlessly grateful for his gift of writing like a real human being, for his homely preferences, for his touch of old-world scholarship, for his quoting Horace, for his occasional tavern or "coffeehouse" manner, his

air of telling us everything, his Rabelaisian tang, his gossipy chuckle, his ready tear, his quips, his snatches of song—and, above all, for that gift which gathers up all these and many other engaging characteristics, the gift of a natural style. He does *not,* thank Heaven, write English as if it were a dead language, nor, on the other hand, does he write it like an advertising man. To write like a human being! If you look around what used to be called the republic of letters, you will be surprised to find how little writing is being done in that way. Everywhere the imitation "style," the pose point of view, the smart, cynical, sophisticated attitude. Yet never have

"We felt life's tide, the sweep and surge
of it,
And craved a living voice, a natural
tone."

more than at this moment.

Mr. Monahan has a gift of literary humanity, a geniality of nature, a talent

for companionship, a ripe and reassuring point of view, a charm of wise and witty and tender utterance, and generally a broad-shouldered, warm and deep-hearted way with him, for which (outside himself, at the moment) we have to look to those older writers, novelists and essayists, who still preserve for us an ever present refuge from the smartness and cynicism of the day.

Much converse with such, and much varied experience of life, lived generously and simple-heartedly, have made of Mr. Monahan "a full man;" and, while these "adventures" of his prove that he is by no means unacquainted or unsympathetic with "those evidences of genius which these present times afford," to quote one of his favorite authors—Maupassant, Turgenev, Wilde, George Moore, and so forth (indeed he was, by sundry excellent translations, one of the earliest introducers of Maupassant to the American public)—yet his favorite lit-

erary pabulum is found in the beef and brawn and the more wholesome delicacies of the time-weathered masters, Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray, Lamb, Poe, Voltaire, Cellini, Horace, Heine, Villon; these and such like are the men for him. It is in their company that he prefers to seek his adventures, as it is in the homelier, broadcast aspects and happenings of life that he finds his satisfactions and "the eternal meanings."

To the recording of these various "adventures" Mr. Monahan brings, as I have said, a style of uncommon naturalness and personal charm. A style that is at once natural and lettered, easy and yet distinguished, is almost an unknown commodity at the present moment. Our essayists seem to suffer from a positive dread of being natural. They seem to aim at being wearily well-bred, and *a la mode*. If they have any natural selves, they are at great pains to conceal the fact, and prefer to pose as blasé and

superior persons. They are either this, or truculent pamphleteers, or superfine "impressionists." They have no bonhomie, they never unbend, never laugh, never, of course, shed a tear. To read them, one would never realize that men still rejoiced in beef and beer and pipes and tobacco, loved their mothers and wives, begat babies, engaged in warm and friendly talk, indulged in kindly nonsense, pursued love or feared death. They prefer unkindly wit to genial humor, cruel skill and power to generous strength; and pity and pathos and tenderness seem to them to smack of the unfashionable and the domestic.

As a contrast to these supercilious exquisites of imitation "style," Mr. Monahan is a boon and a blessing. To open his pages is to breathe the air of a more spacious and friendly era, an era when culture and good-fellowship still walked arm in arm, took their glass together in some snug and lettered tavern, and were

even not above joining in the chorus at some Thackerayan "cave of harmony." It is as though we had dropped in to supper and gin and water at Charles Lamb's, or were making a learned night of it with the bookish roysterers of the *"Noctes Ambrosianae." Noctes Monahanae!* It is not saying too much for our Michael, and grateful we are to be able to say it, that he most successfully revives that ambrosian tradition of what one might call the Bookish Bacchus. The modern tavern has, alas! lost those gracious associations. Things are done differently at the Mermaid nowadays, and Dr. Johnson's chair at the Cheshire Cheese belongs no less to a past age than Cleopatra's Needle. It is our loss. Letters were more truly *litterae humaniores* when associated with the interchange of good talk, the passage of the humanizing bottle, and the meditative cloud of the tranquilizing clay.

This atmosphere, however, is most nat-

urally re-created for himself and his reader in Mr. Monahan's volume, in which literary criticisms, personal confidences, meditations, impressions, fantasies, foot-notes of history, fly-leaves of human story, fables and apothegms, are artfully arranged together, with here and there a ballad, or stave, or a sprig of graver, tenderer verse, decorating the prose with a posy of italics, to make one of those literary medleys, "gallimaufries," which, when made by one naturally born to the method, are of all books the most companionable. It belongs to this method that a man should have been born to write naturally and inevitably about himself, to assume that we are as interested in listening to his confidences as he in making them. This, too, is well-nigh a lost art, but Mr. Monahan is one of its few surviving practitioners, and he avoids its pitfalls with instinctive tact. Whether he is telling us about his boyhood, drawing a picture of an old school-

master, confiding his love affairs, or his literary ambitions, his lost dreams, or his eternal verities, personal habits, preferences, or faiths, we never find it otherwise than natural that he should be thus taking us into his confidence.

We listen to him as simply as we would to Benjamin Franklin or "Elia." He is one of those natural autobiographers, of whom it never occurs to us to ask if they are anybody in particular, that they should thus tell us about themselves. They are entertaining, human beings, with a gift of making anything they touch upon, particularly themselves and their own histories, good listening matter; and so we are only too glad to listen.

And with all this familiar, chimney-corner gossip, Mr. Monahan combines many other literary gifts rarely found together. If you would know how moving he can make a simple human story, read "Mary," or try examples of his gift

for grim and satiric fantasy and fable, read "The Other Face" and "The Lost God;" or admire his skill at portrait making, read "Brother Elias" or "Old Book Men." His sound and illuminative critical gift is in evidence all through his volume, and through it all, too, beats the warm and tender heart of a true poet. It is the presence of that poet everywhere between the lines, not merely in the admirable, spirited, and poignant verses themselves, that is the inspiring, unifying soul of all these wise and witty and endearingly human "Adventures."

THE VAN

R. MONAHAN'S "VAN" is the moving van, and the first section of his book (AT THE SIGN OF THE VAN) that which gives it its title, is occupied with the migrations of The Papyrus, that gallant little magazine whose existence seemed to be by miracle, and whose various re-existences encourage a belief in the resurrection. Mr. Monahan's whimsical humanity, his confidential inclusion of his domestic along with his literary fortunes, make the van seem more like a gypsy van than an ordinary "pantechnicon;" a delightfully happy-go-lucky circus wagon in which "the family," including a well-populated nursery, jog along in happy gregariousness, with the editorial desk, the publishing office, and the advertising department all snugly aboard. It is a great thing to keep a

romantic eye for one's own enterprises. So they renew their youth like the eagle —or I should rather say, like THE PHOENIX, which is the latest avatar of The Papyrus—long life to it! and, when its turn comes (absit omen!) many glorious resurrections! In this first section of "The Van" Mr. Monahan, with charming open-heartedness, has allowed us to share with him the romance of making a little magazine all by one's self, and all for one's self—and a few friends; a magazine for really "gentle" readers, and one that really "enjoys" its circulation. The fun of being one's own contributor, able to say what one—pleases, because one is one's own editor, of being able to edit with the same freedom, because one is one's own publisher; the vicissitudes and surprises of a publication all one's own, including "that exquisite emotion induced by opening a letter with a cheque in it," the excitement of a new subscriber, particularly when that new

subscriber happens to be James Whitcomb Riley:

Here's a dollar from some one in Lockerbie Street,
With the name plain as print in a handwriting neat.
Yes! 'tis his, sure enough, and a pulse of joy fleet
Says a "Howdy!" to Riley in Lockerbie Street. * * *

Just a square bit of paper, but on it a name
That is mellow with genius and golden with fame;
And memories rising with antiphon sweet,
Cry a hail to the Poet in Lockerbie Street.

There is no little of the romance of authorship, as it used to be practised in the old days, about Mr. Monahan's artfully artless revelations as Johnson or Franklin practised it, precariously in garrets, or distractedly in the bosom of one's family, or as an itinerant vendor of one's

own wares; the days before authors rode in motor cars, or had castles, or houseboats, to write in. Mr. Monahan's is a domestic muse, and, in one place, he humorously describes how he is liable to be called down from his eyrie at the top of the house, because "the Two Youngest" have "started something," and his assistance is necessary "to loosen a stranglehold." In such human touches his pages abound and they make no little of his charm. He is the soul of candor. "I have just counted the Coop," he says quaintly in another place, "and they are all here, safe and sound." "Here" was Somerville, New Jersey, whither it had seemed advisable, in the year 1904, to remove the Ark of the Papyrus from its original home in Mount Vernon, whither it was to return again at a later date, a place haloed by Mr. Monahan with unaccustomed rainbows. After all, the only places that are genuinely romantic are the places we have lived in ourselves!

The Van has moved on once more since these pages were written, and the nest of flame from which springs THE PHOENIX is South Norwalk, Conn.

Lovers of a kind of writing hard to find anywhere else at this moment will rejoice that Mr. Monahan achieved, and is still achieving and pursuing, his own magazine, not only for all the fun he himself has gotten, and is still to get, out of it, but because of the body of good reading that he has thus been able to produce, which could have been produced in no other way. For such writing there is unhappily no place any longer in the "big" magazines, for the most part edited, as they are, and perhaps have to be, by the capitalist for the populace: nor would a man be likely, or even able, to sit down and write such things, at first hand, in a book. These various confidences, and meditations, and criticisms, are of their nature "causeries," born of moods and moments that would have

been lost had the medium not been handy for their being shared with the fit audience, though few. The purely literary papers even would scarcely have been half so good had Mr. Monahan sat himself down with the solemn intention of writing on Renan or Byron for, say, the "North American Review." Doubtless, Mr. Monahan could command the magisterial air proper for such august occasions, for, while he is often "very easy in his manners," his style is full of innate dignity, and an old school courtliness of address is one of his anachronistic charms; yet his dignity is of the spontaneous, natural kind, humanly devoid of "ex cathedra" formality. In short, he is a writer whose individuality needs its "own particular air to shine in," and that it has been fortunate enough, or sensible enough, to find.

Another advantage that ensues to us from Mr. Monahan having his own personally conducted magazine is that he is

able, as in this volume, to revive for us "the medley," one of the most companionable forms taken by the dwellers upon shelves. It is a form, for all its desultory air, that demands no little art of arrangement. It comes not of careless heterogeneity, and Mr. Monahan has manipulated his variousness with great skill, the first book of "The Van" being followed by three others dealing with "Adventures in Life," "Adventures in Letters," "Adventures o' the Spirit:" a sort of literary "Bouillabaisse"—which reminds one that the prose is pleasantly set here and there with sprigs of verse, usually after the manner and sentiment of Mr. Monahan's beloved master, Thackeray, to whom he offers unnecessary apologies for the spirited ballad of "The New Bouillabaisse," which will, doubtless, keep alive the memory of a certain friendly New York restaurant (unfriendly word! let us say "eating house") long after it has passed into the limbo of other New York homes of

ancient cheer. Present-day aspects of New York life are made matters of historic record in such refreshingly outspoken papers as "Old Men for Love," "Sex in the Playhouse," "Babylon," and "Trial by Newspaper," the latter a delightfully "knavish piece of work" in the way of satire. Mr. Monahan never minces matters. He has the courage alike of his sympathies and his prejudices.

Another blessed privilege of keeping a magazine! He bends the knee neither to prohibition nor to the American woman. He is as far from being a teetotaler as he is from being a suffragette. In a chapter of forcible common sense entitled "The Lions"—the "two lions in the path of life" being "Drink and Desire"—he has this excellent pronouncement *a propos* men of genius: "The world has learned more from their intemperance in drink and love and other things than from the unshaken virtue of a million parsons. * * * Nature is never less a moralist than when mixing in her

alembic the materials of human greatness;" yet, with the caution of another of his masters, Horace, he concludes: "Most of us are the better for having caroused a while there, (that is in "the House of Excess,") and then, admonished by the clock, paid our shot and come on our way." Among aphorisms highly unsuitable for popular magazines are these: "Modesty is much less native to women than we pretend to believe by a social convention." . . . "It is asserted that from time to time a man appears on this earth who thinks only of the One Woman, and never knows or desires another during his earthly pilgrimage." But I must not seem to imply that such are the prevailing ingredients of Mr. Monahan's "Bouillabaisse." They but occasionally season it with a robust relish, and are but incidental to the same daring sincerity of expression which enables him to say of Shakesepare: "In another generation or so Shakespeare

will be as infrequently acted as the Greek plays." If Mr. Monahan is no "feminist," his tenderness and reverence for women are true and deep. Witness his beautiful "Household Psalm." No more touching tribute to a wife was ever penned, and how pertinent its closing word:

"Think of this now and then during the days she may be yet left to thee."

Other husbands please copy! And the lovely letter to a child which follows it. I wish I could quote them both. But I trust that I have at least suggested the individual charm of Mr. Monahan's book, its ripeness, its gusto, its sense of comradeship, its humor and common sense and all its entertaining variety, that the reader will help it to fulfill the end for which every good book was brought into the world—first to be bought, then to be read. It is too good a book to be borrowed. It is emphatically a book to be bought.

SO HERE ENDETH THIS LITTLE BOOK OF APPRECIATION BY RICHARD LE GALLIENNE, OTHERWISE YCLEPT WITH HONORABLE ADDITION, RICHARD OF THE QUEST. DONE AT THE PRINTERY OF THE PHOENIX IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER ANNO DOMINI MDCCCCXIV

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